Texas and Louisiana
Migration Madness on the Gulf

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma
April 22-29, 2023
April 22 – Sheldon Lake, JJ Mayes Wildlife Trace, High Island

After everyone had arrived the previous evening, we departed from our hotel in Houston and made the short drive to Sheldon Lake. Our main target was Limpkin, which have moved into this area over the last several years. As soon as we pulled in, there it was, a Limpkin! We also enjoyed other wading species including our only Black-crowned Night-Herons of the trip, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and Roseate Spoonbills. After a quick stop for breakfast, we continued our drive east and stopped at JJ Mayes Wildlife Trace. A storm was rolling in, so we were hopeful that the coast would have many migrants present, but we had several hours to spend here before the migrants would arrive from their long journey across the Gulf. Before long we were enjoying our first views of the beautiful Painted Bunting. And, after a long wait, we had great views of SabrewingNatureTours.com

King Rail. A little further down the road we saw our only Black-billed Cuckoo of the entire trip. The conditions were still looking good for coastal birding, so we kept heading east and after a stop for lunch, we headed to the famed High Island. We spent the rest of the afternoon birding Smith Oaks Sanctuary. We enjoyed great views of many warblers, vireos, cuckoos, thrushes, and tanagers! Blackburnians, Bay-breasted, and Magnolias provided great looks from the canopy walk. After the canopy walk, we spent some time walking the trails through the rest of the property and added some understory species such as Veery, Gray-cheeked, and Swainson's Thrushes, Worm-eating Warbler and a Swainson's Warbler! The Swainson's Warbler spent several minutes feeding in the leaf
litter along the trail, providing great looks at this hard-to-find species. Eventually it was
time to head to our hotel, but we were hopeful that there would still be many songbirds
around the following day.

April 24 – High Island, Smith Oaks Sanctuary, Rice Fields, Roll-over Pass

On this morning, we started at S.E. Gast Red Bay in High Island. It was a great
morning for Gray Catbird and thrushes, especially Wood Thrush. We also en-
joyed great views of Ovenbird, Hooded Warbler, and Scarlet Tanagers. Afterwards,
we returned to Smith Oaks Sanctuary to spend the morning searching for more
migrants. The birding was great again and we enjoyed seeing a roosting Common
Nighthawk, an up-close Philadelphia Vireo, and many more thrushes and warblers
including our only Black-throated Blue of the trip. Many Rose-breasted Grosbeaks
and Indigo Buntings also brightened up the morning! After lunch, we spent some
time birding in the nearby rice fields where we were hoping to come across some
shorebirds. There wasn’t too much habitat, but the shorebirds still came through
for us. Before going to far, we saw our first Upland Sandpipers, Whimbrel, and
Dickcissels. Once we got to a field with some water in it, we had a good diversity of
shorebirds. While we were scanning the field five Hudsonian Godwits flew

Yellow-billed Cuckoo
overhead. Since we hadn’t made it to the coast yet, we drove down to Rollover Pass to end our day. Many more shorebirds entertained our group including a pair of American Oystercatchers, Piping Plover, and a couple of Marbled Godwits. Our first Black, Common, Royal, and Sandwich Terns loafed nearby, and a couple of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers made for a great birding stop.

April 25 – Boykin Springs, Sam Rayburn Reservoir, Cattail Marsh

We made a drive north this morning to spend some time birding the piney woods. Once we were close, we made a stop for restrooms, and is so often the case, we were distracted by birds. As we were pulling out, a Mississippi Kite landed across the road. We had great scope views before continuing on our way. Not much further down the road, a Red-headed Woodpecker made an appearance! However, there was some rain on the way, and we needed to spend time looking for a few of the specialties. At our first stop the birding was rather quite except for hearing a Red-cockaded Woodpecker and seeing several Brown-headed Nuthatches. Our next stop proved much more fruitful! Close, long views of a singing Bachman’s Sparrow and a couple Red-cockaded Woodpeckers were the highlights. Luckily, we had seen both of these species, since a few minutes later the rain started and continued for a long while. Instead of birding the forest in the rain, we drove a little ways east to Sam Rayburn Reservoir. Here we enjoyed great looks at another Red-headed Woodpecker, nesting Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Brown-headed Nuthatches, and our only Yellow-rumped Warblers of the trip. After lunch, we headed back to Beaumont and after a short break, we arrived at Cattail Marsh. We met Ken, who works at Cattail (and is a great photographer), to take a ride around the marsh. The
birding was great and we added many new species to our trip list. Our first stop yielded our only Glossy Ibis of the trip. Shorebirds provided a great study, and we added several species such as Baird’s and White-rumped Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Wilson’s Phalarope. At the end of our drive, we enjoyed a great Mexican dinner with another Sabrewing group and some local birders who had been doing a Big Sit at Cattail.

April 26 – Bolivar Peninsula, Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge

We began our morning by driving down the Bolivar Peninsula to the Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary. The birding was great along the entrance road. We enjoyed close looks at Gull-billed Tern, Sedge Wren, and Nelson’s Sparrows. The birding along the beach and flats was also terrific and we added many species of shorebirds to our list. Snowy and Piping Plovers, Red Knot, numerous American Avocets, and a flyby Magnificent Frigatebird were among the highlights. Afterwards we made a stop at Fort Travis Seashore Park where we had great looks at Cave Swallow as well as a several species of shorebirds. After lunch, we stopped by Tuna Road where we had good looks at numerous Seaside Sparrows and good comparisons of several species of shorebirds including Stilt, Least, and Pectoral Sandpipers. Next up was Anahuac NWR! We stopped and birded “The Willows” where we found several migrants including Hooded and Black-and-white Warblers, Summer Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. A drive around the wildlife loop was very active with shorebirds, ducks, and many other waterbirds. The many Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, White-rumped Sandpipers, a vocalizing Black Rail, and a cooperative Least Bittern were among the highlights.
April 27 – Pilot Station Road, Sabine Pass, Sabine Woods

Early on this morning, with storms heading our way, we drove down to Sabine Woods. Within a couple minutes of arriving, the rain started so we headed over to Pilot Station Road for some car birding while we waited for the rain to pass. We spent a couple hours on this road and ended with a long list of birds. We had great looks at Sora and Clapper Rail along the road, more Nelson’s and Seaside Sparrows, our only Franklin’s Gull, Peregrine Falcon, and Bronzed Cowbird, and several migrants including Northern Waterthrush and American Redstart. As we started driving back to Sabine Woods, a few migrants along the road at Sabine Pass Battleground made us pull over and spend a little time birding at this location. Our first Blue-headed Vireo was the highlight. The birding at Sabine Woods was great throughout the rest of the day. Many warblers, thrushes, and
Many warblers, thrushes, orioles, and tanagers were seen. The highlight was two Golden-winged Warblers that provided great views for our group. As was the case throughout this trip, Gray Catbirds were present in large numbers as well. Eventually it was time to make the drive to Lake Charles where we would be staying for the next two nights.

April 28 – Peveto Woods, Willow Island Beach, Rutherford Beach, Cameron Prairie NWR

Our first stop on this morning was at Peveto Woods. This site is similar to the well-known sites in Texas, but much less visited. We enjoyed our time here and ended up seeing almost 90 species during our visit. Vireos were present in good numbers and diversity including White-eyed, Yellow-throated, Blue-headed, Philadelphia, Warbler, and Red-eyed. Gray Catbirds and thrushes were seen in good numbers as well as they had been during our entire visit to this region. 16 species of warblers were also present, most of them being seen quite well. A pair of Painted Buntings also showed off nicely and in great light! After lunch in Cameron, we birded a couple of sites along the beach and added several new species to our trip list including Surf Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, and Pomarine Jaeger. A late afternoon stop at Cameron Prairie NWR provided great looks at many Purple Gallinules and a variety of other waterbirds.
April 29 – Cattail Marsh

On our way back to the Houston airport, we made a stop back at Cattail Marsh in Beaumont. We spent some time birding along the boardwalk and the dikes, and despite the cold windy conditions, we had good looks at a number of species such as Least Bittern and Purple Gallinule. There were even a few migrants around including a Tennessee Warbler.

All told, we had seen over 210 species, had seen many species very well, and enjoyed multiple days of great migration along the coast. It’s always a pleasure to bird this region during spring migration!